

Coalbed methane threatens the Skeena Headwaters

By Shannon McPhail

THE DUST HAS BARELY settled after the three-year battle to keep fish farms out of the mouth of the Skeena River, and already another major threat to Skeena wild salmon is looming on the horizon, this one in the river's very uppermost reaches. There, in a remote alpine basin, the BC government and Shell have plans for an extensive coalbed methane gas field that could prove disastrous for wild salmon, wildlife and an intact wild landscape.

The area has come to be known as the *Sacred Headwaters* because, in addition to the Skeena, it is also the birthplace of two other major salmon rivers: the Nass and the Stikine. Anthropologist Wade Davis compares it to Tibet's Mount Kailas, where the Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra Rivers all begin:

"The thought of violating its flanks with industrial development would represent for all peoples of Asia an act of desecration beyond all imagining," writes Davis in a recent *Globe and Mail* article.

British Columbia's energy ministry and the Europe-based executives of Royal Dutch Shell see things a bit differently. After all, they're not in the salmon business. They see instead a rich resource of "unconventional gas" – coalbed methane gas – that lies trapped within the anthracite coal deposit that forms the Klappan Coalfield. Government estimates peg the size of the resource at eight trillion cubic feet, or about 12 percent of Canada's total annual gas consumption.

In 2004, the BC government granted exclusive rights to Shell Canada Ltd. (as of 2007, Shell Canada is wholly owned by Royal Dutch Shell) to develop Klappan coalbed methane over a 400,000-hectare area of the Sacred Headwaters. But Shell's project has met with stiff opposition – first from the First Nation whose traditional territory includes the area, and more recently from region's downstream communities, concerned about the project's impact on wild salmon and water quality.

Shell managed to drill three wells in 2004 in the Sacred Headwaters, but was evicted the next spring by a group of Tahltan elders. In 2006, the company cancelled its drilling program due to opposition, and in 2007 its crews were delayed by a Tahltan road blockade. In 2008, Shell hopes to finally resume its drilling, but with regional opposition to their project gaining steam, things aren't looking good.

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COALBED METHANE is the problem child of the oil and gas world. Unlike conventional gas deposits, coalbed methane is tricky to extract. First, it's trapped in coal. Second, it's spread out over a large area. And third, it often comes with vast quantities of wastewater that needs to be disposed of.

In Wyoming's Powder River Basin, where 26,000 coalbed methane wells now dot the landscape, ranchers have experienced endless problems with water contamination. In Rosebud Alberta,

landowners can light their tapwater on fire due to the migration of methane into their drinking water wells.

While water contamination is a real concern, the more worrisome impact of coalbed methane development in remote areas is the fragmentation of the landscape. Because it is spread over a vast area, and because it is trapped in coal, coalbed methane requires a much higher well density than conventional gas. And each well requires a pipeline and an access road, the sum of which result in a veritable maze of linear developments.

What does all this mean for wild salmon? That's the question analysts at the Pembina Institute have tried to answer. The Calgary-based energy think tank recently published a report that found that Shell's project poses potentially significant risks for the region's salmon, which swim over 500 kilometres from the Pacific Ocean to spawn in the Sacred Headwaters.

The Institute points to two ways salmon will be affected. Land clearing, it found, changes the patterns and intensity of runoff, increasing erosion and muddying critical spawning habitat. Groundwater removal, even when it occurs deep underground, can change the flow and temperature of streams, with serious implications for salmon.

"Wild salmon are integral to the cultures and the economy of the Northwest," says Greg Brown, a Pembina policy analyst. "Until we know more about the potential impacts on salmon, and how – or if – those impacts can be mitigated, proceeding with coalbed methane in the Headwaters would be an irresponsible experiment."

The area's wildlife stands to be impacted, too. The Sacred Headwaters lies adjacent to the renowned Spatsizi Wilderness Area, often called the "Serengeti of the North." Stone sheep, grizzly bears, wolves and caribou all roam the meadows of the area, interacting in age-old predator-prey relationships that today remain intact in only a few places in North America.

Erin Sexton from the University of Montana has done considerable research on coalbed methane and wildlife. With regard to BC's East Kootenay Region, she writes:

"...management of the East Kootenay for methane production and management for large carnivore populations are incompatible. This is due to the magnitude of the disturbance that results from coalbed methane production and the vulnerability of large carnivores to human industrial disturbance."

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IN PUSHING ITS PROJECT FORWARD, Shell has come up against the strong conservation ethic running through Northwest BC's diverse communities. People (and don't call them environmentalists or you might see the business end of a caulk boot) share a common understanding that the region's lifestyle and economy depend on wildlife, wild salmon and intact landscapes. And they're willing to fight for it.

The venerable Collingwood family, whose guiding territory includes the Spatsizi Wilderness, has come out against Shell's proposal. They've launched a webpage (spatsizi.com/sacred) dedicated to the issue and are encouraging clients to write to the BC premier.

On the salmon side of things, the Friends of Wild Salmon – the coalition of First Nations, commercial fishermen, anglers, and community groups behind the fish farm campaign – has redirected its capacity to stopping Shell's project. They're joined by the Skeena Watershed Conservation Coalition and the Prince Rupert Environmental Society, among others.

Regional groups are circulating a resolution calling for an end to Shell's drilling in the Sacred Headwaters. It's received hundreds of individual signatories, and has been officially endorsed by the Skeena-Queen Charlotte Regional District, Kitimat-Stikine Regional District, the Village of Hazelton, and more than half a dozen First Nations band councils. And the list is growing.

Outside the region, others are taking the message to Shell at every opportunity. At the invitation of Tahltan elders, thirteen prominent environmental NGOs – including the Natural Resources Defense Council, ForestEthics, Friends of the Earth International, the David Suzuki Foundation and Sierra Club – have leant their voices to the cause. In 2007, they wrote a joint letter to Shell calling for the company to pull the plug on its project, and later ran an advertisement in the Financial Times of London. One BC activist recently flew to Shell's AGM in the Hague and unveiled a banner with Shell's logo and a dead salmon.

Maude Barlow from the Council of Canadians even used her acceptance speech at the 2008 Canadian Environment Awards to denounce Shell's plans for the Sacred Headwaters.

In May, all this dissent came to a boil when over 400 people packed Hazelton's Gitanmaax Hall on the bank of the Skeena River to share their thoughts on Shell's coalbed methane plans. Members of more than eight of the region's First Nations attended, and citizens from communities from Telkwa to Prince Rupert. One by one, the people in the room walked to the microphone and delivered their unanimous opposition to the project.

“As an MP I get project after project after project for all kinds of crazy things come across my desk,” Nathan Cullen, the region's charismatic young Member of Parliament told the crowd to loud applause. “And I have yet to come across a project that presents more risks and less benefits to our people than this one. And it has to be stopped. Full stop.”

Enough said.

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Shannon McPhail is the executive director of the Skeena Watershed Conservation Coalition. She is a fifth generation resident in the Kispiox Valley (a tributary of the Skeena) where she lives with her husband and two small children. She can be reached at info@skeenawatershed.com